

Dr. Mona Ivey-Soto

**How can colleges and universities ensure they are producing relevant research that is timely, accurate, sound in theory and has solid practical applications that can be used to solve problems confronting societies?**

There is no more pressing mission for America's higher education institutions than to prepare thoughtful, committed citizens to help overcome the various challenges facing communities today. But more than just teaching students basic civics lessons, many colleges are applying their knowledge and resources to strengthen the communities in which they reside (Alliance for Youth, 2004). Colleges and universities are uniquely positioned to serve as a conduit for connecting theory to practice for students and cultivating the next cadre of leaders who understand the unique and complex dimensions of social problems/issues. The strength of an institution can be found in its interest in and ability to reach outside of its neatly constructed boundaries and learn from the communities that surround these spaces of higher learning.

Traditionally, many institutions of higher education have seen themselves as being knowledge creators separate from and independent of the broader community within which they operate. The analogy of the "ivory tower" which sits on a hill separate both in distance and sentiment from the individuals and dynamics operating around it still holds true for many institutions. However many are realizing that in order to produce high quality, rigorous knowledge that is prepared to confront and interrogate complex social ills universities and colleges need to partner with individuals and organizations on the ground.

This partnership must be mutually beneficial and must allow both entities to fully utilize their strengths. We know that creating policies for communities and society at large must include "with" and not just "for." Many well researched reform "agendas" and large scale projects have failed because they have been unwilling to or disinterested in truly assessing the strengths and needs of a community and instead have entered these spaces as an outsider and created a project that can neither be sustained or fully incorporated because the constituents didn't have buy in or viable say as to the creation or implementation of a policy, project, or plan.

So what does a truly collaborative, strategic partnership look like in order to produce research that is sound, sustainable and viable for diverse communities. Here are some important elements to consider:

- Colleges and universities must hire faculty who have a vested interest in both being a scholar and a learner within communities. There must be a true curiosity to learn from and engage with community members on a regular basis and in an authentic manner.
- Colleges and universities must ensure that there are consistent, flourishing relationships with the community where trust and honesty are central. These connections will allow for meaningful research to take place that empowers rather than marginalizes communities.

- Colleges and universities must ensure that faculty is remaining current in their research by supporting their efforts to attend and present at rigorous peer reviewed conferences in their respective disciplines. This knowledge building will be critical in guiding the design of research and grant writing that is prepared for current trends and issues.
- Colleges and universities must be deeply committed both in word and in deed to recruiting, hiring and retaining faculty from diverse racial, ethnic, religious and demographic groups so that the perspectives and areas of research are broad, deep and inclusive. Additionally a multicultural group of faculty committed to social justice and equity (within and between academic disciplines) will operate from a perspective that is critical for multiple audiences (i.e. community, other universities, non profits etc.).
- Colleges and universities must value research, grant funded projects and other scholarly endeavors that are accessible to a wide range of individuals. Publishing in Tier 1 peer reviewed journals is respected and necessary, however institutions that seek to remain current and relevant, must reach a wide audience will find their work meaningful and oriented for social change. Ensuring that faculty seeks publications, presentations, action research and curriculum development that involve multiple stakeholders allows for true engagement that is sustaining and beneficial.

In a time when it's easy to feel overwhelmed, burdened and filled with despair given the sociopolitical climate ramped in our country, it is imperative that universities and colleges seek the social good. This work must be active, intentional and based on core ideologies that further social justice and challenges oppression wherever it is found.